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Telling ELT Tales out of School

Stories in ELT: Telling tales *in* school

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Abstract

This presentation looked at four types of stories that could be told 'in school': two for use in supporting language learning and two for supporting language teacher learning. Stories were told and theoretical arguments for their use made – including the argument that the interactive, contingent, context-specific and one-off *experience* of being told stories (which cannot be rendered in a written paper) is likely to have a different (and perhaps greater, in the transformative sense) impact than any more academic argumentation or explanation.

Keywords: stories; young learners; tasks; teacher development; teacher Education; mentoring.

1. Introduction

This talk, inspired by our conference theme, took perhaps the oldest human didactic tool – the telling of stories – and attempted to show how it is as useful and powerful now as it ever was. We looked first at language learning and at how (and why) listening to an appropriate story, well-told, might be useful in classes for both younger and older learners. We then considered the role of stories in supporting teacher development, whether told 'teacher to teacher' in peer support situations, or by a 'teacher of teachers' in more formal group training situations.

2. Stories in ELT Classes

Arguably, only three conditions are absolutely *essential* for language learning to occur. Put another way, without any one of these three conditions it is fairly clear that language learning (whether of a first or subsequent language) will *not* occur (see e.g. Spolsky, 1998, Ellis, 1995). These are: *exposure* to the target language; *motivation* to learn the language, and opportunities to *use* the language. It seems logical that if teachers are available (the presence of whom, it may be worth noting is *not* an 'essential condition' for language learning, although they may – or may not

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– be helpful) then fundamentally they will need to ensure that these essential conditions exist for their learners. That is, they will need to be as concerned to ensure that their learners are exposed sufficiently to the target language, have enough opportunities to use the language for their own purposes and to express their own meanings, and are motivated to do so, as they are with, for example, 'covering' the syllabus or materials. Telling learners stories in English is one way to increase 'exposure', can be motivating (if appropriate stories are told well), and can initiate a learning sequence leading to meaningful use of language.

2.1. In a young learner class

The table below summarises some of the reasons why telling stories is a particularly appropriate strategy in a young learner class. Children naturally 'go for meaning' and learning sequences for young learners are generally thought to be most effective if they follow a 'meaning, use and form' sequence (Moon, 2000, Cameron, 2001). In other words, children are first exposed to new language which is meaningful to them, then provided with opportunities to use and try out some of the new language, and finally helped to notice the patterns in, or forms of, the new language (both spoken and written). Telling a story (with supportive visual aids and gestures to aid comprehension) in which new language is embedded, often repeated, and (importantly) presented following normal rules of use, can be a useful first step in this sequence.

And there are many other ways in which stories 'match' children's natural ways of learning. Children learn through play and the exercise of their imaginations, and understanding and enjoying a story requires the use of these 'instincts'. In terms of language learning, children are adept at picking up chunks of language, and stories often include such chunks repeatedly. If motivation is to be supported, teachers will need to find and offer 'child-like' purposes for the language learning activities they ask children to engage in (e.g. 'let's play a game/see who can solve this puzzle' etc.). Listening repeatedly to favourite stories is a typical beloved activity for children, and so asking children to listen (again) to a story ('shall we have a story? /listen to that story again?') gives an appropriate child-centred purpose to the activity. And the repetition of favourite stories can allow for greater class involvement as well as the kind of repeated exposure which can allow more 'picking up' of language.

Table 1Why stories are useful in a Young Learner class

A Story	Children
• provides a meaningful context	• learn in a Meaning, Use and Form sequence
• exercises the imagination	• naturally make full use of their imaginations
• provides exposure to chunks of language	• naturally pick up chunks of new language
• listening to or reading a story is a naturally child-like activity	• are easily motivated by child-focussed activities
• contains natural repetition of key vocabulary and structures	• naturally enjoy listening to stories over and over again

The example story I chose to tell in this context (with many illustrations and appropriate body language to support access to meaning) was a short one (in part for my own timing reasons), and one with a chant-like quality, and with rhymes, to allow the children also to 'play' with the sounds of the language. It nonetheless has the main elements of a narrative structure (e.g. characters, problem, and resolution):

'Tick tock' goes the clock
'Tick tock, TICK TOCK'!
Old mouse gets a sock
'Tick tock', *thick* sock
He puts the sock on the clock
(whew!) No more 'tick tock'

(adapted from a rhyme in materials for the Primary English Teacher Training project (PETT), The British Council, Guangzhou Province, China, and the University of Leeds)

The second telling could involve the children in, for example, making the 'tick tock' sound of the clock throughout, (until the clock is covered) with two children miming 'clock' and 'old mouse'. In addition, in subsequent telling, children could take over the narrator role ('goes the clock', 'old mouse gets a sock', 'he puts the sock on the clock') with everyone in chorus saying the last line. After these phases focusing on 'meaning' and 'use', in this example, the children's attention could be drawn, for example, to the form of the third person present simple (although not by using that meta-language!).

2.2. Stories for older schoolchildren

Telling stories to older schoolchildren, while useful for many of the reasons given above, may be trickier: teenagers may consider being told a story 'childish'. So what matters here is the choice of story, and the task that is set following the story. Useful stories for this age group are ones that promote thinking, and appropriate tasks ones which relate in some way to the learners' concerns.

As an example, I told the audience the story of the old man by the road who sat watching travellers walking from one village to the next. As one group of travellers passed, they greeted the old man and stopped to ask a question, 'What', they asked, 'are the people in the next village like?' The old man responded with another question 'before I answer, can you tell me what the people were like in the village you have just come from?' The travellers replied telling him that they had been very disappointed, that they had found the villagers inhospitable and unkind, and some even claimed that they had encountered brigands and thieves there. 'In that case', said the old man, 'I'm very sorry to tell you that you will probably find the people in the next village much the same'. The travellers,

disappointed, thanked the old man for his information and continued their journey. Then along came another group. They too greeted the old man and stopped to ask the old man about the people in the next village. Again the old man asked them what they had thought of the villagers in the village they had just left. This time the travellers responded differently. 'They were wonderful', the travellers enthused, 'so kind and hospitable, so thoughtful and generous'. 'In that case' said the old man, 'I'm happy to say that I expect you will find the people in the next village are much the same' (adapted from a story in Owen, 2001). Following the story, I set small groups to work on the following task: 'in your groups, agree on three ways the story could be relevant to your language learning'. Participants found that the story could send messages about the likelihood of 'ups and downs' on the learning journey, the need for the travellers (learners) to do the walking (learning) themselves, the benefits of a positive attitude and of having a goal.

3. Stories in Teacher Development

Elbaz, in an early paper discussing the storied nature of teacher knowledge, defines 'story' as "the very stuff of teaching, the landscape within which we live as teachers …. and within which the work of teachers can be seen as *making sense*." (Elbaz 1991:3, my emphasis). Ensuring the 'relevance' to their learners of what teachers of teachers provide has long been a challenge in teacher education. The use of any tool, such as 'story' which might help what we want to teach to 'make sense' to our learners therefore seems sensible.

3.1. Working with real stories of teaching

One type of story that is worth working with in situations designed to support teachers' (on-going) learning are the real stories from the experiences of teaching of the 'teacher-as-learner' (whether in formal or informal situations, or whether during preservice 'training' or inservice development, or whether working individually (in thought or writing) or in a one to one or in group situation).

There is a long tradition of working with 'critical incidents', to help the teacher-as-learner understand what to avoid or look out for in future, and to consider how to 'do better next time'. However, any teacher can learn just as valuable insights from working with stories of teaching that went well – insights that might help their teaching 'go well' on more occasions - if they come to understand what about the events in the story they tell were the crucial factors that contributed to the perceived success. Or indeed, they may also revise their views on what constitutes a lesson 'going well'. In other words, *any* story of teaching can be a useful starting point for the kind of learning that will be, and importantly, will be *perceived* to be, totally relevant to the story-teller.

One way for the story-teller to arrive at such informed insights is to work through the five step process below, which attempts to describe the steps of 'informed reflection', or a view of teacher learning (discussed more fully in Malderez & Wedell, 2007).

Table 2 Five steps for learning from our own and others' experience

1. Tell a teaching story, ensuring that:
   a) you have a clear picture – in other words, 're-view' (see - and hear - the events again)
   b) the story you tell is a ***description***
   c) you give enough detail so that any listeners also get the same 'clear picture' as you.

2. Generate as many ideas as you can which might explain or interpret the part of the story that prompted you to choose to tell *this* story and not another (the triumph, the problem, or the puzzle). If you have listeners, you may choose to invite them to give you any ideas they have.

3. Think out loud about any other information you know/ can find which might help you choose the most likely explanation or interpretation, (or begin to get ideas for what you might do) You could pause at this point to ask others or even to search in relevant texts.

4. Now decide which you think is the most likely explanation, and consider whether your reasoning is 'robust'. (You could check this with any listeners.)

5. Finally think through the implications of this process:

   for your future teaching;
   for what you might want to try to notice
   for your learning;
   for your pupils' learning.

In more formal teacher development group situations, step three above is the moment when a teacher of teachers' input might be (and be seen to be) valuable – thus usefully promoting a teacher perception of a practical usefulness of 'theory'. The process is also a useful one for peer support groups, and arguably one a mentor will want to scaffold in one-to-one mentoring situations.

3.2. Metaphorical stories

While the stories in 3.1 are told by those teachers who are in teacher-as-learner role, there are sound arguments for a teacher of teachers to tell stories of the kind described in 2.2. above - when appropriate stories can be found that might elicit the desired 'messages'. Unlike teenagers, teachers are often glad of the 'rest' and fun that sitting back and listening to a story can afford. But there are other sound theoretical reasons for the use of metaphorical story-telling in teacher education, relating to current views of teacher knowledge and teacher learning. The experience of 'listening to a story' can provide the starting point for a guided 5-step learning sequence (Malderez & Wedell 2007). And, it is in precisely the conditions of 'fun', 'metaphor' and 'leisure' that insights from that which has been experientially 'learnt' can become conscious and available for re-examination (Claxton, 1997). In other words, stories can help make the *implicit*, experientially learned knowledge that all teachers bring with them *explicit* – to the teacher as well as to others. In addition, or perhaps rather because of all the above, such stories provide

'memorable moments' (Van Lier, this conference) and an anchor for the more complex theoretical constructs discussed.

As an example, conference participants were told a (very) adapted version of 'lunchtime learning' (Owen, 2001) which I use early in mentor development work to introduce a taxonomy of mentor roles (Malderez & Bodoczky 1999). It is a long story, and I include, therefore, only the skeleton/story outline below, with the corresponding mentor roles in the right-hand column.

Table 3 'Mummy Mouse' story outline

Story	Mentor Roles
Mouse family on farm	
Mummy mouse see her babies are ready (eyes now open) to come out of the nest into the field.	Acculturator
'Follow me' – one baby frightened – Mummy reassures 'I'll be with you'	Support
Outside – babies play in sun, MM watches with love and pride	
Along comes Mr Squirrel. Babies frightened. MM reassures	Support
MM introduces babies to Mr Squirrel. They chat. Mr S leaves. MM explains to babies that Mr S is useful to know – where he is there is often food – nuts etc.	Sponsor
Babies play – THEN over them comes a shadow – it's	
A CAT! – Tom the farm cat	
MM sees him looking at babies, in his eyes: 'Yummy, dinner!' Thinks to herself 'not my babies!'	Support (protector from anti-mentoring behaviour in context)
MM runs between – puffs up big – and 'barks'!	Model
Tom runs away – relief!	
MM asks babies to describe what just happened & then to say what they learnt	Educator
Babies (& listeners) contribute ideas – e.g. sometimes we need to be brave and speak out, 'cats' are dangerous, be careful, + the importance of learning a foreign language.	
But we, as teachers becoming mentors, can learn a lot too from MM's behaviour – in the story she displayed all 5 of the main roles of a mentor.... etc.	

4. Conclusion

Telling appropriate stories well requires careful selection of the story to be told. Useful sources of such stories I have found include the internet (joke stories, or stories with 'morals' that circulate), Owen (2001), books on

teaching English to Young Learners, the British Council teaching English website (www.teachingenglish.org.uk), books of local 'folktales' and our parents or grandparents (one story my father told me as a girl, 'Freddy the Frog' and which I now use in teaching, can be found in Malderez & Wedell 2007).

In addition, in my view, the story when used 'in school' needs to be *told* (not, for example, read aloud), so that the story-telling event can be interactive in the sense of responding to the visual (and sometimes verbal) clues that listeners provide. In this way learners are included in the story-telling event. In addition, when *telling* (rather than, for example, reading) stories to language learners, we provide a useful model of our ability to express our own meanings. Because of the need to tell the story in ways which respond to a particular group of listeners' reactions, a teacher who intends to tell a story (whether to school-children learning English, or to teachers) will need to prepare. This will involve both a practical preparation of any supporting visual aids, but also some important personal preparations. Firstly, these may require the creation of a story skeleton, or outline (making notes on the main points, as above) if it is not a story the teachers knows well. This outline can then be used as a prompt during the next phase of preparing - rehearsals (long -suffering family members are useful in this regard). Rehearsals allow the teacher to comes to know the story-outline well enough to be able to tell the story in class in a way which responds to the particular contributions of the particular learners. They also allow the practice of accompanying supportive body language and appropriate linguistic expressions.

Finally, the influential educational psychologist, Jerome Bruner once wrote: 'Obviously, if narrative is to be made an instrument of mind on behalf of meaning-making, it requires work on our part - reading it, making it, analysing it, understanding its craft, sensing its uses, discussing it' (1996:41). This presentation not only aimed to contribute to these discussions, but also, through providing conference participants with the experience of listening to and working with stories, to encourage others to (re-)consider the use of story-telling in their own classes.

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